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SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR R U/S KAREN HUGHES, G U/S DOBRIANSKY AND EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR KPAO SCUL AJ

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: FIRST LADY MEHRIBAN ALIYEVA REQUESTS MEETING WITH FIRST LADY LAURA BUSH DURING PROPOSED TRIP TO UNITED STATES

REF: BAKU 1272

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¶1. (U) This is an action request. Please see paragraph 5.

¶2. (SBU) Deputy Foreign Minister (and former Azerbaijan Ambassador to the U.S.) Hafiz Pashayev, who is assisting First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva in planning her trip to the U.S. this fall/winter, told the Ambassador that the trip will have an official focus, introducing Aliyeva in her new role as a member of Parliament and as chair of the Parliament's U.S.-Azerbaijan Interparliamentary Group. The trip will also highlight her role as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador and include events to showcase Azerbaijani music and culture. He said that based on advice from Senator Richard Lugar, she is now thinking of traveling after the November U.S. elections, probably around December 10-15, to two or three U.S. cities. Pashayev said he is seeking USG advice and assistance with Aliyeva's visit. Aliyeva is very interested in meeting with First Lady Laura Bush, he noted, and will time her travel to permit such a meeting. Pasheyev asked that the Embassy advise on the possibility and timing of such a meeting.

¶3. (SBU) Pashayev said the key objective of the visit is to highlight the role of Azerbaijan as "an educated Muslim country with religious tolerance and rights for women." He said that Aliyeva's personal image and a well designed program will help project this image of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's history of religious tolerance and as a modern, secular Muslim society will be "up front in our agenda" for the visit. He agreed that Aliyeva's interest (relayed earlier to the Ambassador in reftel), in offering the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, which she chairs, to help support an international conference on religious tolerance in Baku this year, could be a subject of discussion in Washington. If the USG would be interested in joining efforts on such a conference, agreement to do so could be an outcome of her visit to the U.S., he said.

¶4. (SBU) Pashayev said Aliyeva also is interested in a event focused on "Women in Leadership in Muslim Countries," possibly on the Hill, perhaps with participation from Senators such as Hutchinson, Clinton, and Collins. She would like to do a speech/event at a U.S. university, possibly at SAIS's Central Asia and Caucasus Institute (Pashayev is in touch with Fred Starr and Svante Cornell). Zbigniew Brzezinski has agreed to introduce her. She intends to bring Azerbaijani musicians with her and would offer a cultural event as well. She will seek an event at the U.S.-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce.

15. (SBU) Comment and action request: As noted reftel, we view Aliyeva's planned visit as an opportunity to collaborate with a key player in Azerbaijan, and to advance U.S. interests in a stronger, positive dialogue with a highly tolerant, secular Muslim country in a strategic region. Aliyeva's interest in religious tolerance and women's rights and education, and her interest in working with the U.S. on a conference on religious tolerance, suggest that meetings with Under Secretary Hughes and Under Secretary Dobriansky would be useful in strengthening our dialogue in these areas. We would urge that Under Secretary Dobriansky also discuss with Aliyeva Azerbaijan's plans for political reform and economic development and environmental issues, given Azerbaijan's plans to address its legacy of environmental damage. We ask that the Department please advise whether a meeting with First Lady Laura Bush will be possible, and if so, when would be most convenient. Please also advise if meetings with U/S Hughes and Dobriansky will also be possible.

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